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ABSTRACT

The first rule for setting up and working with an advisory is to know that their advice is needed and should be valued. An advisory ensures that advice is received from segments of the community that usually have no voice in policy making. The purpose of the advisory should be established immediately. Familiarization with holidays, vacations, budgeting periods, and other events that will affect the advisory should then take place. Once the basic purpose of and the context in which the advisory must operate has been agreed on, membership becomes an issue. It is essential that care be given to the kinds of people that should be on an advisory. The process of developing membership is continuous; as people agree to serve, a sense of what other kinds of people are needed is developed. After membership selection is completed, the firs meeting should be planned. The agenda for the first and subsequent meetings should be worked out in advance with several members and then checked for acceptance with the whole group at the beginning of the meeting. Hopefully, by the end of the first meeting the group will have (1) shared a common understanding of their mission; (2) selected a temporary chairman; (3) reached agreement on how often, when, and where to meet; and (4) settled on an agenda or process for creating an agenda for the following meeting. (RC)

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HOW TO WORK WITH ADVISORIES

This paper should be seen as the first part of an ongoing dialogue on "how to work with advisories." My perspective will be that of the staff member assigned to work with urban and metropolitan appointed advisories. Rural and suburban as well as Board and Advisory viewpoints will have to be developed by others.

The suggestions that follow are merely techniques to be tried, not definitive answers. They do not represent the state of the art; they are a statement of what I will be trying next.

Original Sin

Most of the sins heaped upon advisories, and those who must work with them, occur at inception. An institution hassled by a public that doesn't feel well-served often will respond by setting up a Citizen's Advisory. If that initial step is taken "to get the public off its back", rather than to receive badly needed advice, what follows will reflect that cynicism.

You Need Their Advice

The first rule for setting up and working with an advisory is, "KNOW THAT YOU NEED THEIR ADVICE AND VALUE IT."

Why do you need it? Reasons can vary from community to community, but some are basic. Any institution, in time, becomes inbred, egocentric, its vision narrowed. Solutions become impossible because there is no money, no time, no personnel, no precedent, no policy. Outsiders, not hampered by

such realities, can transcend them. I often warn advisory members not to make the fatal mistake of becoming too sympathetic with the problems of the institution they are trying to change. Another reason for setting up an advisory is to ensure that you receive advice from segments of the community that currently have no voice in policy-making -- racial and ethnic minorities, teachers, parents, students, women, older people, the handicapped. Of course, the main benefit, and the one most often overlooked, is that there are good ideas out there; why not take advantage of them.

Mission Possible

The first and toughest question becomes, "What is the purpose of this particular advisory?" If you've been assigned the responsibility of working with an advisory, do them, and yourself, a favor by clearing up that major question early. Are they to critique a program after it has been developed by staff? Are they to make input before development, and then critique after the product is ready? Are they to assess needs, evaluate performance? Is their approval mandatory or optional? Try to push for maximum input before development, but if you lose that one, don't paint the role of the advisory to be more than it is. Some advisory members intuitively understand that once you get the camel's nose under the tent, it is easy to shove in the rest of the camel. Don't promise them more than you can deliver, but leave room for their imagination.

Uni-cycles, Bi-cycles, Tri-cycles

Take time at the initial stages to familiarize yourself with all the "cycles" that will affect your advisory. If it's related to a school system,

what are the holidays, vacations, marking periods, when are budgets approved, when does the school committee meet, when are teacher contracts negotiated. School systems must relate to State Department's of Education, and SDE's must interact with the federal government. Get on top of as many of these "cycles" as you can. Your advisory will either find itself swinging off the outside of the cycle, constantly in a reactionary posture, or it can be on the inside, making input before programs and budgets are fixed.

The six regional advisories for the Massachusetts Department of Education have had to step off the legislative merry-go-round temporarily in order to step back on at a point where they can make input into Board-sponsored legislation rather than offering half-hearted after-the-fact support. In this case, since the Department must be tuned into the Board cycle, and the Board into the Legislature's cycle, regional advisories must allow a good four months lead time.

Don't Get Caught in the Squeeze

Try to minimize the number of layers that the advisory must report to. Title I programs that have to face a vote at the local level, the regional level, the school committee, and then on to the State and finally the federal government, often meet themselves coming the opposite way, for changing federal guidelines have made the approved programs obsolete and the process must begin over again.

Definitely clear up how much latitude you will be given in negotiating with the council. There is nothing more frustrating and disastrous than being caught in a squeeze between your council and "higher officials", either a superior or a Board. If you can't deliver on a promise for materials,

meeting space, an opportunity to be heard, or technical support, your ability to work with a council on a basis of mutual respect will be damaged. Instead of aiding the process of community input, you will become one more layer in the bureaucracy.

Membership on the Advisory

Once the basic purpose has been agreed upon and you understand the scope of your role as well as the context in which the advisory must operate, membership becomes an issue. Advisories vary from federally mandated councils of a fairly specific nature (e.g., the Advisory Committee to the Metropolitan Planning Project, MPP, a $1 million program to develop a voluntary desegregation plan for the Boston region) to local general advisories (e.g., the advisory for your local school). In all cases, someone must take the initiative to start the process of finding members who are willing to serve.

If you find yourself in the position of implementing federal (or other) membership guidelines, and they don't seem to apply to your region, it is worth the effort to make that known to Washington (or the appropriate source). For example, although federal ESSA guidelines called for a black/white membership on the MPP Advisory, it would have been inappropriate to leave out Spanish-speaking and other minorities. After some nudging, the Office of Education agreed to a 1/4 white, 1/4 black, 1/4 Spanish-speaking, and 1/4 other (Chinese, American Indian, Korean) ratio.

Even when membership is not mandated, it is essential that you give care to the kinds of people that should be on your advisory. The process of developing membership is organic; as people agree to serve, you develop a

sense of what other kinds of people are needed. One helpful technique is to prepare a matrix (which you may later burn) to assure appropriate representation. List the necessary role categories along the left side; e.g., teachers, students, administrators, principals, superintendents, community agencies, business, labor, guidance counsellors, minority groups. Across the top you can list other characteristics you may need to watch for (the under-represented) such as race, ethnic background, sex, geography, age, linguistic minority, and so on. If you have trouble filling some of the categories with people of certain characteristics, don't assume the reason to be that "there aren't any suitable women, or chinese, or students." Instead take your problem as evidence of the need for a broad-based advisory; your range of contacts is too narrow. Keep working at finding the needed representation.

CATEGORIES	NAME, ADDRESS, PHONE, ORGANIZATION		MALE	FEMALE	MINORITY	NON-MINORITY	GEOGRAPHY	ETC.
Teachers								
Students								
Parents								
Principals								
Community								
Etc.								

A word of caution is in order. At a recent meeting where an advisory was being developed, Elaine Kistiokowsky, a long-time advocate of community participation in education, spoke in behalf of a "critical mass" of student membership. Think twice before you fall into the trap of saying, "Well, we should have one teacher, one parent, one administrator....one guidance counsellor and one student." Even though the role-ratio may be one-to-one, the adult to young person ratio may be overwhelming. Also, ask yourself if public, private, and parochial representation should be sought.

It's a good idea to seek outside advice from the moment you actually begin selecting members; otherwise, you risk forming an unintentional company union. (The art of working with elected advisories will have to be addressed by someone with that experience.)

If there is an organized constituent group, try to let them select their own representative; for example, the student can be selected by the student advisory, the teacher by the teacher union. By taking this route, you can plug into an existing network that will be useful for both gathering and disseminating ideas. But, be sure that you have some new faces, especially if the student, parent, or teacher organizations are already viewed as too close to the administration. If some of your selections must be politically inspired, make sure that you end up with an overwhelming majority of members who are sharp, committed, and outspoken.

The Need and the Right to Know

Your first phone call to a potential member will give clues as to the kind of information people need in order to make decisions. "Just what is the purpose of this advisory?" will be followed by, "How often will it meet

and what time will it meet?" Time of meetings is a constant dilemma since school personnel are often free just when parents are not. Some systems rotate between afternoon and evening meetings. Progressive systems provide babysitting service or reimbursement for child care and travel costs.

Usually the meeting time must be left to the full membership to decide; however, do give potential members a minimum standard of involvement such as, "Probably the council will meet once a month, although members who are able to give more time are encouraged to meet more frequently in sub-groups.

Make sure that each member has all the information that they must have in order to do their job. But watch it if you find yourself "giving them more than they need." It's tempting to load down advisory members with reams of fine-print, tedious records and reports, especially if you can't understand the material yourself. A basic rule of thumb is, of course, if you find it boring, they may find it even more boring. Any information that an advisory feels essential should be made available to them. Very little public information is priviledged; you will have a hard time convincing staff members of this fact. Some special materials will have to be developed. People need to know how to get in touch with each other; they need to have a sense of sequence -- the information about cycles that you have uncovered should be shared with your advisory.

Facing the First Meeting

If you've managed to lay all the groundwork properly, you will now be facing a representative, intelligent, informed, and eager advisory. Each advisory will develop its own style. I can only share some observations on how to begin.

The agenda for the first, and subsequent, meetings should be worked out in advance with several members and then checked for acceptance by the total group at the beginning of the actual meeting. Members who have a sense of ownership of the agenda are more attentive.

Be a little gutsy at that first meeting. Break people up into teams; let them interview and then introduce one-another to the full group. Take a few risks.

After suitable introductions, make sure that you all share a common understanding of your mission. It is worth an investment of time to clear up that question at the onset. These discussions can be scary, appearing to lead nowhere. Listen extremely carefully to each speaker and make notes so that you can focus on areas of agreement, narrow areas of disagreement. Don't skimp on the chart paper and magic markers. Don't let good ideas "get lost." When a member generates an idea that calls for additional attention, write it up on the chart paper for all to see. Make sure those good ideas appear in later accounts of the meeting. Even if you are good at group process, eventually you should try to turn that function over to members of the advisory. Get to know your advisory members; introduce them to all members of the staff or Board; encourage them to make suggestions between meetings and to call for information. Call upon them for advice.

If you're lucky, by the end of the first meeting you will have a group that shares a common understanding of their mission, has selected a temporary chairman, has reached agreement on how often, when, and where to meet, has undertaken some homework, and has settled upon either an agenda or a process for creating an agenda for the following meeting.

You're on Your Own

Breakdowns are bound to occur. Meet them with honesty. Has the group become distracted from its basic purpose? Has the basic purpose become stale, or has another purpose proved to be more to the point? How much of the problem is in your control? How much is in the hands of the Board or Advisory? Does the Advisory need new blood? Are there historical grievances that must be faced before people can work together? Is one member dominating to the chagrin of the others? Are there basic differences of opinion that can only be reflected in majority and minority reports? Use your brain and listen to your intuition. Figuring out the problem is the hardest part. You and an intelligent, committed advisory can come up with the answers.